DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 304 630 CG 021 504

AUTHOR Purkey, William W.
TITLE An Overview of Self-Concept Theory for Counselors. Highlights: An ERIC/CAPS Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Personnel Services, Ann Arbor, Mich.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 88
CONTRACT R188062011
NOTE 3p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC/CAPS, 2108 School of Education, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Counselor Role; *Individual Development; Influences; *Self Concept; *Theories
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This overview of the self-concept theory describes how people organize and interpret their personal existence. It discusses the beginnings and recent history of the self-concept theory, and presents three major qualities of self-concept: that it is learned, organized, and dynamic. It asserts that individuals have relatively boundless potential for developing a positive and realistic self-concept. (NB)

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HIGHLIGHTS ...An ERIC/CAPS Digest

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An Overview of Self-Concept Theory for Counselors

After more than a decade of relative neglect, self concept is enjoying renewed popularity and attention by both researchers and practitioners. There is growing awareness that of all the perceptions we experience in the course of living, none has more profound significance than the perceptions we hold regarding our own personal existence -- our concept of who we are and how we fit into the world.

Self-concept may be defined as the totality of a complex, organized, and dynamic system of learned beliefs, attitudes and opinions that each person holds to be true about his or her personal existence. Self-concept is different from self-esteem (feelings of personal worth and level of satisfaction regarding one's self) or self-report (what a person is willing and able to disclose). Fromm (1956) was as beautifully clear as anyone when he described self-concept as "life being aware of itself."

Brief History of Self-Concept Theory

A milestone in human reflection about the non-physical inner self came in 1644, when Rene Descartes wrote *Principles of Philosophy*. Descartes proposed that doubt was a principal tool of disciplined inquiry, yet he could not doubt that he doubted. He reasoned that if he doubted, he was thinking, and therefore he must exist. Thus existence depended upon perception.

A second milestone in the development of self-concept theory was the writing of Sigmund Freud (1900) who gave us new understanding of the importance of internal mental processes. While Freud and many of his followers hesitated to make self-concept a primary psychological unit in their theories, Freud's daughter Anna (1946) gave central importance to ego development and self-interpretation.

Self-concept theory has always had a strong influence on the emerging profession of counseling. Prescott Lecky (1945) contributed the notion that self-consistency is a primary motivating force in human behavior. Raimy (1948) introduced measures of self-concept in counseling interviews and argued that psychotherapy is basically a process of altering the ways that individuals see themselves.

By far the most influential and eloquent voice in self-concept theory was that of Carl Rogers (1947) who introduced an entire system of helping built around the importance of the self. In Rogers' view, the self is *the* central ingredient in human personality and personal adjustment. Rogers described the self as a social product, developing out of interpersonal relationships and striving for consistency. He maintained that there is a basic human need for positive regard both from others and from oneself. He also believed that in every person there is a tendency towards self-actualization and development so long as this is permitted and encouraged by an inviting environment (Purkey & Schmidt, 1987).

While most self-concept theorists continued to write and conduct research during the 1970s and 1980s, general interest in self-concept declined. In a recent article explaining the likely causes for the decline of "humanistic" education, Patterson (1987) presents reasons for the decline of interest in self-concept as well. He offers four likely causes:

1. A cornucopia of contrived **games, gimmicks, and techniques** that were introduced and controlled by unprepared professionals.
2. A national mood of **"back to basics"** in education prevailed where concern for the emotional needs of students was viewed as inimical to academic excellence.
3. Poor judgment by counselors and teachers in selecting suitable materials for **values clarification programs** resulted in public opposition to any attempt to introduce values in school.
4. Strong opposition by those who objected to any consideration of personal development of students because they believed it to be **secular humanism** and, therefore, an effort to undermine religion.

Fortunately, there is a new awareness on the part of both the public and professionals that self-concept cannot be ignored if we are to successfully address such nagging problems as drug and alcohol abuse, drop-out rates, dysfunctional families, and other concerns. In addition to this growing awareness, new ways are being developed to strengthen self-concepts. For example, research by cognitive theorists (McAdam, 1986; Ryan, Short & Weed, 1986) are demonstating that negative self-talk leads to irrational thinking regarding oneself and the world.

Some Basic Assumptions Regarding Self-Concept

Many of the successes and failures that people experience in many areas of life are closely related to the ways that they have learned to view themselves and their relationships with others. It is also becoming clear that self-concept has at least three major qualities of interest to counselors: (1) it is learned, (2) it is organized, and (3) it is dynamic. Each of these qualities, with corollaries, follow.

Self-concept is learned. As far as we know, no one is born with a self-concept. It gradually emerges in the early months of life and is shaped and reshaped through repeated perceived experiences, particularly with significant others. The fact that self-concept is learned has some important implications:

- Because self-concept does not appear to be instinctive, but is a social product developed through experience, it possesses relatively boundless potential for development and actualization.

Counseling and Personnel Services Clearinghouse
2108 School of Education, The University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1259 (313) 764-9492

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- Because of previous experiences and present perceptions, individuals may perceive themselves in ways different from the ways others see them.
- Individuals perceive different aspects of themselves at different times with varying degrees of clarity. Therefore, inner focusing is a valuable tool for counseling.
- Any experience which is inconsistent with one's self-concept may be perceived as a threat, and the more of these experiences there are, the more rigidly self-concept is organized to maintain and protect itself. When a person is unable to get rid of perceived inconsistencies, emotional problems arise.
- Faulty thinking patterns, such as dichotomous reasoning (dividing everything in terms of opposites or extremes) or overgeneralizing (making sweeping conclusions based on little information) create negative interpretations of oneself.

Self-Concept Is Organized. Most researchers agree that self-concept has a generally stable quality that is characterized by orderliness and harmony. Each person maintains countless perceptions regarding one's personal existence, and each perception is orchestrated with all the others. It is this generally stable and organized quality of self-concept that gives consistency to the personality. This organized quality of self-concept has corollaries.

- Self-concept requires consistency, stability, and tends to resist change. If self-concept changed readily, the individual would lack a consistent and dependable personality.
- The more central a particular belief is to one's self-concept, the more resistant one is to changing that belief.
- At the heart of self-concept is the self-as-doer, the "I", which is distinct from the self-as-object, the various "me's." This allows the person to reflect on past events, analyze present perceptions, and shape future experiences.
- Basic perceptions of oneself are quite stable, so change takes time. Rome was not built in a day, and neither is self-concept.
- Perceived success and failure impact on self-concept. Failure in a highly regarded area lowers evaluations in all other areas as well. Success in a prized area raises evaluations in other seemingly unrelated areas.

Self-concept Is dynamic. To understand the active nature of self-concept, it helps to imagine it as a gyrocompass: a continuously active system that dependably points to the "true North" of a person's perceived existence. This guidance system not only shapes the ways a person views oneself, others, and the world, but it also serves to direct action and enables each person to take a consistent "stance" in life. Rather than viewing self-concept as the *cause* of behavior, it is better understood as the gyrocompass of human personality, providing consistency in personality and direction for behavior. The dynamic quality of self-concept also carries corollaries.

- The world and the things in it are not just perceived; they are perceived in relation to one's self-concept.
- Self-concept development is a continuous process. In the healthy personality there is constant assimilation of new ideas and expulsion of old ideas throughout life.
- Individuals strive to behave in ways that are in keeping with their self-concepts, no matter how helpful or hurtful to oneself or others.
- Self-concept usually takes precedence over the physical body. Individuals will often sacrifice physical comfort and safety for emotional satisfaction.
- Self-concept continuously guards itself against loss of self-esteem, for it is this loss that produces feelings of anxiety.
- If self-concept must constantly defend itself from assault, growth opportunities are limited.

Summary

This brief overview of self-concept theory has focused on describing the ways people organize and interpret their inner world of personal existence. The beginnings of self-concept theory and its recent history have been discussed. Three major qualities of self-concept—that it is: (1) learned, (2) organized, and (3) dynamic—have been presented. Individuals have within themselves relatively boundless potential for developing a positive and realistic self-concept. This potential can be realized by people, places, policies, programs, and processes that are intentionally designed to invite the realization of this potential.

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William W. Purkey
Professor of Counselor Education
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. R188062011. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.